

A
HIGHER
LOYALTY

TRUTH, LIES, AND
LEADERSHIP

JAMES
COMNEY

A
H I G H E R
L O Y A L T Y

TRUTH, LIES, AND
LEADERSHIP

J A M E S
C O M E Y



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Flatiron Books ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

To my former colleagues, the career people of the Department of Justice and the FBI, whose lasting commitment to truth keeps our country great

AUTHOR'S NOTE

WHO AM I TO TELL others what ethical leadership is? Anyone claiming to write a book about ethical leadership can come across as presumptuous, even sanctimonious. All the more so if that author happens to be someone who was quite memorably and publicly fired from his last job.

I understand the impulse to think that any book written about one's life experience can be an exercise in vanity, which is why I long resisted the idea of writing a book of my own. But I changed my mind for an important reason. We are experiencing a dangerous time in our country, with a political environment where basic facts are disputed, fundamental truth is questioned, lying is normalized, and unethical behavior is ignored, excused, or rewarded. This is not just happening in our nation's capital, and not just in the United States. It is a troubling trend that has touched institutions across America and around the world—boardrooms of major companies, newsrooms, university campuses, the entertainment industry, and professional and Olympic sports. For some of the crooks, liars, and abusers, there has been a reckoning. For others, there remain excuses, justifications, and a stubborn willingness by those around them to look the other way or even enable the bad behavior.

So if there ever was a time when an examination of ethical leadership would be useful, it is now. Although I am no expert, I have studied, read, and thought about ethical leadership since I was a college student and struggled for decades with how to practice it. No perfect leader is available to offer those lessons, so it falls to the rest of us who care about such things

to drive the conversation and challenge ourselves and our leaders to do better.

Ethical leaders do not run from criticism, especially self-criticism, and they don't hide from uncomfortable questions. They welcome them. All people have flaws and I have many. Some of mine, as you'll discover in this book, are that I can be stubborn, prideful, overconfident, and driven by ego. I've struggled with those my whole life. There are plenty of moments I look back on and wish I had done things differently, and a few that I am downright embarrassed by. Most of us have those moments. The important thing is that we learn from them and hopefully do better.

I don't love criticism, but I know I can be wrong, even when I am certain I am right. Listening to others who disagree with me and are willing to criticize me is essential to piercing the seduction of certainty. Doubt, I've learned, is wisdom. And the older I get, the less I know for certain. Those leaders who never think they are wrong, who never question their judgments or perspectives, are a danger to the organizations and people they lead. In some cases, they are a danger to the nation and the world.

I have learned that ethical leaders lead by seeing beyond the short-term, beyond the urgent, and take every action with a view toward lasting values. They might find their values in a religious tradition or a moral worldview or even an appreciation of history. But those values—like truth, integrity, and respect for others, to name just a few—serve as external reference points for ethical leaders to make decisions, especially hard decisions in which there is no easy or good option. Those values are more important than what may pass for prevailing wisdom or the groupthink of a tribe. Those values are more important than the impulses of the bosses above them and the passions of the employees below them. They are more important than the organization's profitability and bottom line. Ethical leaders choose a higher loyalty to those core values over their own personal gain.

Ethical leadership is also about understanding the truth about humans and our need for meaning. It is about building workplaces where standards are high and fear is low. Those are the kinds of cultures where people will feel comfortable speaking the truth to others as they seek excellence in themselves and the people around them.

Without a fundamental commitment to the truth—especially in our public institutions and those who lead them—we are lost. As a legal principle, if people don't tell the truth, our justice system cannot function and a society based on the rule of law begins to dissolve. As a leadership principle, if leaders don't tell the truth, or won't hear the truth from others, they cannot make good decisions, they cannot themselves improve, and they cannot inspire trust among those who follow them.

The good news is that integrity and truth-telling can be modeled in powerful ways, shaping cultures of honesty, openness, and transparency. Ethical leaders can mold a culture by their words and, more important, by their actions, because they are always being watched. Unfortunately, the inverse is also true. Dishonest leaders have the same ability to shape a culture, by showing their people dishonesty, corruption, and deception. A commitment to integrity and a higher loyalty to truth are what separate the ethical leader from those who just happen to occupy leadership roles. We cannot ignore the difference.

I spent a lot of time thinking about the title of this book. In one sense, it came out of a bizarre dinner meeting at the White House, where a new president of the United States demanded my loyalty—to him, personally—over my duties as FBI director to the American people. But in another, deeper sense, the title is the culmination of four decades in law, as a federal prosecutor, business lawyer, and working closely with three U.S. presidents. In all those jobs, I learned from those around me and tried to pass on to those I worked with that there is a higher loyalty in all of our lives—not to a person, not to a party, not to a group. The higher loyalty is to lasting values, most important the truth. I hope this book is useful in stimulating all of us to think about the values that sustain us, and to search for leadership that embodies those values.

INTRODUCTION

Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

—REINHOLD NIEBUHR

THERE ARE TEN BLOCKS between FBI headquarters and Capitol Hill, and each of them is fixed in my memory from countless shuttle missions up and down Pennsylvania Avenue. Riding past the National Archives, where tourists were lined up to see America's documents, the Newseum—with the words of the First Amendment carved into its stone front—and the T-shirt vendors and food trucks had become something of a ritual.

It was February 2017, and I was in the back row of a fully armored black FBI Suburban. The middle row of seats had been removed, so I sat in one of the two seats in the back. I had gotten used to watching the world pass by through the small dark bulletproof side windows. I was on the way to yet another classified congressional briefing on the 2016 Russian election interference.

Appearing in front of members of Congress was difficult on a good day, and usually disheartening. Nearly everyone appeared to take a side and seemed to listen only to find the nuggets that fit their desired spin. They would argue with each other through you: “Mr. Director, if someone said X, wouldn't that person be an idiot?” And the reply would come through you as well: “Mr. Director, if someone said that someone who said X was an idiot, wouldn't that person be the real idiot?”

When the subject involved the most contentious election in memory, the discussion in the immediate aftermath was even more vicious, with few

willing, or able, to put aside their political interests to focus on the truth. Republicans wanted to be assured that the Russians hadn't elected Donald Trump. Democrats, still reeling from the election results weeks before, wanted the opposite. There was little common ground. It was like having Thanksgiving dinner with a family eating together by court order.

The FBI, with me as its director, was caught in the middle of the partisan bile. This was not really new. We had been sucked into the election starting in July 2015, when our seasoned professionals at the FBI began a criminal investigation of Hillary Clinton's handling of classified information on her personal email system. It was a time when even using the terms "criminal" and "investigation" was a source of needless controversy. A year later, in July 2016, we began an investigation into whether there was a massive Russian effort to influence the presidential vote by hurting Clinton and helping elect Donald Trump.

This was an unfortunate, if unavoidable, situation for the Bureau. Though it is part of the Executive Branch, the FBI is meant to stand apart from politics in American life. Its mission is to find the truth. To do that, the FBI can't be on anyone's side except the country's. Of course, members of the Bureau may have their own private political views, like anybody else, but when its people rise in a courtroom or in Congress to report what they have found, they can't be seen as Republicans or Democrats or part of anyone's tribe. Forty years ago, Congress created a ten-year term for the FBI director to reinforce that independence. But in a capital city, and a country, torn by partisan conflict, the FBI's separateness was both alien and confusing, and constantly tested. This placed an enormous strain on career professionals in the agency, especially as their motives were routinely being questioned.

I glanced over at Greg Brower, the FBI's new head of congressional affairs, who was riding to the Hill with me. Greg was a fifty-three-year-old Nevadan with salt-and-pepper hair. We had hired him from a law firm. Prior to that, he had been the chief federal prosecutor in Nevada and also an elected state legislator. He knew the business of law enforcement and also the challenging and very different business of politics. His job was to represent the FBI in the shark tank of Congress.

But Brower hadn't signed up for this kind of turmoil, which only grew after the shocking result of the 2016 election. Greg hadn't been part of the Bureau for long, so I was worried this craziness and stress might be getting to him. I half wondered whether he might fling open the door of the Suburban and head for the hills. At a younger age, with fewer turns at the witness table in Congress, I might have considered exactly the same thing. As I looked at him, I assumed he was thinking what I was thinking: How did I end up here?

I could see that worry on Brower's face, so I broke the silence.

"HOW GREAT IS THIS?" I said in a booming voice that no doubt caught the attention of the agents in the front seats.

Brower looked at me.

"We're in the SHIT," I said.

Now he seemed confused. Did the FBI director just say "shit"?

Yup, I had.

"We're waist deep in the shit," I added with an exaggerated smile, holding my arms out to show just how deep it was. "Where else would you want to be?" Mangling the St. Crispin's Day speech from Shakespeare, I added, "People abed in England tonight will wish they were here."

He laughed and visibly lightened. I lightened, too. Although I'm sure the thought of leaping from the speeding car still crossed Greg's mind, the tension was broken. We took a breath together. For a moment, we were two people on a road trip. Everything was going to be okay.

Then the moment passed, and we pulled up to the U.S. Capitol to talk about Putin and Trump and collusion allegations and secret dossiers and who knew what else. It was just another high-pressure moment in what was one of the craziest, most consequential, and even educational periods of my—and, some might say, the country's—life.

And more than once I found myself thinking that same question: How on earth did I end up here?

CHAPTER 1

THE LIFE

To not think of dying, is to not think of living.

—JANN ARDEN

THE LIFE BEGINS with a lie.

In 1992, I was an Assistant U.S. Attorney in New York City, and those were the words I heard from a senior member of one of the most notorious crime families in the United States.

Salvatore “Sammy the Bull” Gravano was the highest-ranking American mobster ever to become a federal witness. He’d flipped to avoid a life sentence in jail, and also because he had heard government tapes in which his boss, John Gotti, said bad things about him behind his back. Now in our custody, Gravano introduced me to the rules of Mafia life.

Membership in La Cosa Nostra—“this thing of ours”—became official only after an oath taken in a secret ceremony in front of the boss, underboss, and consigliere of the family. After the ceremony, the criminal would be known as a “made man.” The first question of the secret initiation was “Do you know why you are here?” The chosen one was required to answer “No,” despite the fact that, as Gravano explained, only an idiot wouldn’t know why the leaders of the family were gathered with him in the basement of some nightclub.

For nearly two decades, the leaders of the American Mafia agreed there would be no new members. In 1957, they “closed the books”—a term

reflecting that the process involved the actual sharing of paper among the Mafia families containing the aliases and real names of their members—because of serious concerns about quality control and penetration by informants. But in 1976 they agreed that each family could make ten new members and then the books would be closed again, with new members only admitted to replace those who died. For each family these ten were the most hardened all-star gangsters who had been frozen out for years. Gravano came into the Mafia as part of that “super class.”

Inducting ten new members after so long a shutdown obviously put burdens on the criminal enterprise. In a typical induction ceremony, an initiate is expected to hold in his cupped hands a flaming picture of a Catholic saint, stained with blood dripped from his trigger finger, and recite, “My soul should burn like this saint if I ever betray Cosa Nostra.” Gravano recalled that when they reached the dramatic conclusion of his ceremony, he was forced to recite those words while holding a flaming bloodstained tissue instead. The Gambino family hadn’t bothered to get enough saint pictures to burn.

Gravano’s induction ceremony not only began with lies, it also ended with them. The boss reviewed for him the rules of American Cosa Nostra: no killing with explosives; no killing law enforcement; no killing other made men without official permission; no sleeping with another made man’s wife; and no dealing in narcotics. As a general rule, the Mafia did a good job following the first two rules. The American government would crush anyone who harmed innocents with explosions or killed law enforcement. But the promises not to kill made guys, bed their wives, or deal dope were lies. Gravano and his fellow Mafia members routinely did all three. As my fellow prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald explained it, they were like the rules against fighting in hockey—on the books as a no-no, but still a regular feature of the game.

The closely related Sicilian Mafia had a different rule, one that highlighted the centrality of dishonesty to the entire enterprise of organized crime on both sides of the Atlantic. Newly inducted members were told that they were forbidden to lie to another “made member”—called a “man of honor” in Sicily—unless, and this was a big unless, it was necessary to lure

him to his death. I once questioned another government witness, Sicilian Mafia killer Francesco Marino Mannoia, about this rule.

“Franco,” I said, “that means you can trust me unless we are about to kill you.”

“Yes,” he replied, confused by my question. “Men of honor may only lie about the most important things.”

The Life of Lies. The silent circle of assent. The boss in complete control. Loyalty oaths. An us-versus-them worldview. Lying about things, large and small, in service to some warped code of loyalty. These rules and standards were hallmarks of the Mafia, but throughout my career I’d be surprised how often I’d find them applied outside of it.

My early career as a prosecutor, especially my role in confronting the Mafia, reinforced my belief that I’d made the right career choice. The law hadn’t been an obvious route for me. Ultimately I chose a career in law enforcement because I believed it was the best way I could help other people, especially those suffering at the hands of the powerful, the crime bosses, the bullies. I didn’t know it at the time, but it’s possible that a life-altering experience I had when I was sixteen years old, with a gun literally pointed to my head, made that choice inevitable.

* * *

The gunman didn’t know I was home that night. He had been watching through a basement window and saw my parents say good-bye to the figure lying on the floor of the family room, lit only by the television’s light. He probably thought that figure was my sister, Trish. But it actually was my younger brother, Pete (Trish had returned to college after fall break and our youngest brother, Chris, was out at a Boy Scouts meeting). Minutes after my parents drove away, he kicked in the front door of our modest ranch-style house and headed straight downstairs.

October 28, 1977, the day that changed my life, was a Friday. For most of the New York area, the prior few months were known as the Summer of Sam, when the city and its suburbs were gripped by a serial killer preying on couples sitting in cars. But for northern New Jersey, it was the summer—and fall—of the Ramsey Rapist. The attacker was named for the dozen

attacks that had begun in a town called Ramsey; our town, sleepy Allendale, was just to the south.

Hearing heavy steps on the creaking basement stairs and a low growl from our dog, Pete jumped up and moved out of view. But the gunman knew he was there. He pointed a handgun and ordered my brother to come out from his hiding place. He asked if anyone else was home. Pete lied and said no.

At the time, I was a high school senior and a nerd with few close friends. As if to prove it, I was home that night, finishing a piece for the school's literary magazine. It was to be a brilliant social satire of the cool kids, the bullies, and the suffocating peer pressure of high school. The piece was late, and short on brilliance, but I had nothing else to do on a Friday night. So I sat at the desk in my little bedroom, writing.

In the basement with Pete, the gunman demanded to be taken up to the master bedroom. Shortly I heard two sets of footsteps just outside my door, headed for my parents' room. Then I heard more sounds, as the closet and dresser drawers opened and closed. Out of annoyance and curiosity, I stood and opened the sliding wood door to the bathroom that connected my room to my parents'. Their room was brightly lit, and through the bathroom I could see Pete lying on the side of the bed, his head turned toward me, but with his eyes tightly closed.

I stepped into the room, looked to my right, and froze. A stocky, middle-aged white guy wearing a knit cap was holding a gun and looking in my parents' closet. Time slowed down in a way I have never again experienced. I lost my sight for an instant; it returned in a strange haze and my entire body pulsed, as if my heart had grown too big for my chest. Spotting me, the gunman moved quickly to Pete and put his knee in the middle of his back, using his left hand to push the gun barrel against my fifteen-year-old brother's head. He turned to me.

“You move, kid, and I'll blow his head off.”

I didn't move.

The gunman had angry words for Pete. “I thought you told me nobody else was home.”

The gunman then stepped off Pete and ordered me to lie on the bed next to my brother. Standing at my feet, he demanded to know where he might find money. I later learned Pete had money in his jeans pocket as we lay there, and never gave it up. I gave it all up. I told him every place I could possibly think of—piggy banks, wallets, dollar coins received from grandparents for special events, everything. Armed with my leads, the gunman left us lying on the bed and went searching.

A short time later, he returned and simply stood above us, pointing his gun in our direction. I don't know how long he pointed it without a sound, but it was long enough that the moment changed me. I was certain I was about to die. Hopelessness, panic, and fear smothered me. I began to pray silently, knowing that my life was about to end. In the next instant, a strange wave of cold washed over me, and my fear disappeared. I began reasoning, thinking that if he shot Pete first, I would roll off the bed and try to grab the gunman's legs. And then I began to speak—to lie, more precisely. The lies came pouring out. I explained how estranged we were from our parents—hated them, actually—didn't care what he took from them, and wouldn't tell anyone he had been there. I lied again and again and again.

The gunman told me to shut up and ordered both of us to our feet. He then began pushing us down the narrow hallway from my parents' room, pausing to search rooms and closets he passed. I was now convinced, temporarily at least, that I was going to live and began trying to get a clear look at his face so I could tell the police about him. He jammed me in the back several times with the gun barrel, telling me to turn my head away from him.

I again began talking, telling him over and over that he should just put us someplace and we would stay there so he could get away. I began racking my brain, trying to think of such a place in the house—a place where we could be locked. Against all reason, I suggested the basement bathroom, telling him we couldn't open the small window because my father had sealed it for the winter. That was only partly true: my dad had put clear plastic on the window frame to reduce the draft, but the window opened simply by raising the bottom half.

He took us to the basement bathroom, motioned us inside, and said, “Tell your mommy and daddy you’ve been good little boys.” He wedged something against the bathroom door to keep us from escaping.

We heard the door to the garage open and close as the gunman left. I started to shudder as the adrenaline wore off. Shaking, I looked at the little window and suddenly the gunman’s face filled it. He was checking the window from the outside. The sight made me gasp for air. After his face disappeared, I told Pete that we were going to stay there until Mom and Dad came home. Pete had other ideas. He said, “You know who that is. He is going to hurt other people. We’ve got to get help.” In my shaky state, I don’t think it fully dawned on me what Pete was saying, or how the evening might have played out if our nineteen-year-old sister, Trish, actually had been home.

Instead I resisted. I was afraid. Pete argued with me briefly and then announced that he was leaving. He pulled the plastic from the window, turned the half-moon latch, and raised the window open. He swung himself out feetfirst and into the backyard.

Though it was probably only a second or two, in my memory I stood for a long time contemplating the open window and the dark night. Should I stay or should I follow? I swung my feet through the window. The moment they hit the cold dirt of my mother’s garden, I heard the gunman shouting. I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled furiously into thick bushes at the back of the house. The gunman already had grabbed Pete and now was shouting toward me, “Come out of there, kid, or your brother is getting hurt.” I emerged, and the gunman berated me for lying to him. Fresh out of another clever lie, I replied, “We’ll go right back in,” and I moved toward the open window.

“Too late,” he said. “Against the fence.”

For the second time that night I thought I was going to die. That was, until I heard our neighbor’s huge Siberian husky, Sundance, bound into our backyard with his owner, Steve Murray, the high school German teacher and football coach, bounding in after him.

The next seconds are a blur in my memory. I remember running from the gunman into my house with Pete and Coach Murray close behind and then

slamming the door behind me. We locked the door, leaving the gunman outside to terrorize Coach's wife and mother, who had followed him toward the commotion at our house—a move that makes me cringe with guilt even decades later.

We then raced up the stairs, turning out all the lights and arming ourselves. I held a large butcher knife. We didn't have 911 in those days, so we dialed the operator and I asked to be connected to the police. I spoke to a dispatcher, who kept telling me to calm down. I explained that I couldn't calm down, that a man with a gun was at our house and he was coming back in and we needed help now. We waited by the front door in the dark and debated going after the gunman. A police car pulled up in front of my house. We blinked the front lights and the car came to a stop. We ripped open the front door and ran straight at the officer, me barefoot and holding a large butcher knife. The officer quickly stepped from his car and his hand went to his weapon. I shouted, "No, no!" and pointed toward the Murrays' house. "There he goes. He has a gun!" The gunman burst out from the Murrays' front door and took off running toward the nearby woods.

As police cars from many jurisdictions converged on our little street, I jumped on my Schwinn ten-speed, barefoot, and pedaled the quarter mile to the church hall where my parents were taking ballroom dancing lessons. I jumped off the bike, letting it crash, ripped open the church hall door, and yelled "Dad!" at the top of my lungs. Everyone stopped and the crowd moved toward me, my mother and father in the lead. My mother started crying the moment she saw my face.

The police didn't find the Ramsey Rapist that night. A suspect was arrested days later, but the case was never made and he was released. But that night the long string of Ramsey Rapist robberies and sexual assaults stopped.

My encounter with the Ramsey Rapist brought me years of pain. I thought about him every night for at least five years—not most nights, *every* night—and I slept with a knife at hand for far longer. I couldn't see it at the time, but the terrifying experience was, in its own way, also an incredible gift. Believing—knowing, in my mind—that I was going to die, and then surviving, made life seem like a precious, delicate miracle. As a

high school senior, I started watching sunsets, looking at buds on trees, and noticing the beauty of our world. That feeling lasts to this day, though sometimes it expresses itself in ways that might seem corny to people who fortunately never had the experience of measuring their time on this earth in seconds.

The Ramsey Rapist taught me at an early age that many of the things we think are valuable have no value. Whenever I speak to young people, I suggest they do something that might seem a little odd: Close your eyes, I say. Sit there, and imagine you are at the end of your life. From that vantage point, the smoke of striving for recognition and wealth is cleared. Houses, cars, awards on the wall? Who cares? You are about to die. Who do you want to have been? I tell them that I hope some of them decide to have been people who used their abilities to help those who needed it—the weak, the struggling, the frightened, the bullied. Standing for something. Making a difference. That is true wealth.

* * *

The Ramsey Rapist didn't drive me to law enforcement in any conscious way, at least not immediately. I still thought I wanted to be a doctor, and became a premed student with a chemistry major at the College of William & Mary. But one day I was headed to a chem lab and noticed the word DEATH on a bulletin board. I stopped. It was an advertisement for a class in the religion department, which shared the building with the chemistry department. I took the course, and everything changed. The class allowed me to explore a subject of intense interest to me and see how religions of the world dealt with death. I added religion as a new second major.

The religion department introduced me to the philosopher and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, whose work resonated with me deeply. Niebuhr saw the evil in the world, understood that human limitations make it impossible for any of us to really love another as ourselves, but still painted a compelling picture of our obligation to try to seek justice in a flawed world. He never heard country music artist Billy Currington sing, "God is great, beer is good, and people are crazy," but he would have appreciated the lyric and, although it wouldn't make the song a hit, he

probably would have added, “And you still must try to achieve a measure of justice in our imperfect world.” And justice, Niebuhr believed, could be best sought through the instruments of government power. Slowly it dawned on me that I wasn’t going to be a doctor after all. Lawyers participate much more directly in the search for justice. That route, I thought, might be the best way to make a difference.